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Mississippi Kids Count: Literacy

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MISSISSIPPI KIDS COUNT – LITERACY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

II. CURRENT PROGRAMS IN MISSISSIPPI ADDRESSING LITERACY

A. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

B. PROMISING PILOT PROGRAMS

III. OTHER STATES' EFFORTS TO COMBAT CHILD ILLITERACY

A. ENTIRE FAMILY AND HOME-BASED PROGRAMS

B. PROVIDING LITERACY TRAINING IN OTHER SOCIAL SERVICE CONTEXTS

C. NATIONAL FUNDING SOURCES

IV. MOVING FORWARD

I. Introduction

“More than any other single skill, the ability to read – and read well – allows a child to succeed in school, learn about the world, function in society, and someday have good job options.”¹

It is indisputable that having literate and well-educated children is crucial to the future of both Mississippi and the nation as a whole. The National Institute for Literacy defines literacy as “all the activities involved in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and appreciating both spoken and written language.”² It involves the ability of a person to interact with others, succeed in school, understand and solve problems presented to them, perform on the job and as a part of society, and achieve one’s goals for the future.³ Lack of basic literacy skills is associated with “academic failure, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency, unemployment, low productivity, and welfare dependence.”⁴ Literacy, therefore, encompasses a range of skills and abilities that highly impact one’s future and accordingly ought to be acquired, and ought to be acquired beginning at the earliest age possible. Mississippi, which is cited in many reports as having among the worst literacy rates in the country, must invest in the literacy of its children for the betterment of the entire community across a range of measures.⁵

Obtaining sufficiently high levels of literacy is a national concern. In a 2007 national study of the readings skills of American fourth graders, sixty-five percent of the students performed at or above basic levels of literacy with only thirty-one percent achieving proficient or above levels.⁶ The remaining thirty-five percent of America’s forth graders read at levels so low that it would interfere

¹ National Children’s Literacy Website, National Children’s Literacy Information Project, <http://www.child2000.org/lit-tips.htm>.

² NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY, EARLY BEGINNINGS 14 (2009), <http://www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/EarlyBeginnings.html>.

³ The Importance of Children’s Literacy, Page Ahead Children’s Literacy Program, http://www.pageahead.org/childrens-literacy_why-childrens-literacy.php

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ See, e.g., NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, RESEARCH DIVISION REPORT #46, READING AT RISK: SURVEY OF LITERACY READING IN AMERICA 14 (June 2004); National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, Literacy Initiative Empowers Mississippi Residents, http://www.nasaa-arts.org/spotlight/stspot_1104.shtml; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science, National Center for Education States, State & County Estimates of Low Literacy, <http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/estimates/StateEstimates.aspx>.

⁶ The Nation’s Report Card, Reading: Mississippi Grade 4 (2007), http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2007/ (last visited March 21, 2010).

with their ability to successfully complete their schoolwork.⁷ While of national concern, literacy must be of specific concern to the state of Mississippi. In Mississippi, fifty-one percent of fourth graders performed at or above the basic level, with only nineteen percent reaching proficient or above.⁸ While it should be acknowledged, and appreciated, that these scores constitute an improvement in the last decade and a half (in 1992, only forty-one percent of Mississippi students were performing at or above basic level),⁹ much work remains as high levels of literacy are so crucial.

The “building blocks” of literacy begin developing in infancy, with the exposure of babies and toddlers to words, sounds, speech and text.¹⁰ As children grow, the literacy foundation they have is crucial to their future reading, writing and comprehension success. Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade are likely to remain behind their peers through at least the end of fourth grade.¹¹ One study suggested that there was as much as an eighty-eight percent probability that a child who is a poor reader at the end of first grade will remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade.¹² The trend continues into high school, as seventy-four percent of third graders who perform poorly in reading will continue to do so into high school.¹³ It is apparent then that attention must be paid to reading, writing, computation, phonetic, and other literary skills from the very beginning and throughout childhood.

As mentioned above, the effects of lacking basic literacy skills are widespread and profound, affecting an individual’s employment prospects, earning potential, civic engagement, social participation and criminal record. An eight-month survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 1992 found that low levels of literacy were associated with lower salaries and levels of

⁷ TIMOTHY SHANAHAN, ET. AL. NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY, DEVELOPING EARLY LITERACY: REPORT OF THE NATIONAL EARLY LITERACY PANEL xiv (2008), www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf [hereinafter NELP Report].

⁸ The Nation’s Report Card, Reading: Mississippi Grade 4 (2007), http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading-_2007/ (last visited March 21, 2010).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ National Institute for Literacy, Early Childhood, <http://www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/earlychildhood.html>.

¹¹ Connie Juel, *The Impact of Early School Experiences on Initial Reading*, in 2 HANDBOOK OF EARLY LITERACY 410, 410 (Susan B. Neuman ed., 2006).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ NELP Report, *supra* note 7, at xiv.

employment than the general population.¹⁴ Individuals at the highest levels of literacy reported earning roughly \$450 more a week than those individual performing at the lowest levels of literacy.¹⁵ A second study conducted in 2003 found that of the thirty million adult Americans who tested below basic levels of literacy, fifty-five percent of them had not graduated from high school, increasing the difficulty of obtaining employment.¹⁶ Additionally, the study identified a clear relationship between literacy skills and civic engagement, such that as literacy rises, so too does the likelihood of voting in state and/or national elections.¹⁷

There is a clear and apparently cyclical relationship between household income levels and literacy success. According to one study, only fourteen percent of children who receive reduced-lunch are proficient readers by the time they reach fourth grade, as compared to forty-two percent of fourth graders who do not.¹⁸ In Mississippi, fifty-eight percent of the students eligible for reduced-lunch scored below basic literacy levels, as compared to forty-nine percent statewide.¹⁹ This so-called “knowledge gap,” has been explained by a lack of two different kinds of resources: material and emotional.²⁰ Children from low-income families are less likely to have ready access to the physical materials important for developing early literacy, such as books, magazines, and newspapers.²¹ They are also less likely to have caregivers with the time and opportunity to read to them, and less exposure to new and varied vocabulary.²² Children who enter school without these experiences arrive with a disadvantage that they often carry with them through their education.²³ Again, demonstrating the importance of developing strong literacy skills early, it has been suggested that at the beginning of kindergarten, a few additional months of instruction would allow high-risk students

¹⁴ IRWIN S. KIRSCH, ET. AL., U.S. DEPT. OF EDUCATION, OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT, ADULT LITERACY IN AMERICA: A FIRST LOOK AT THE FINDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY xv, xix (2002), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=93275> [hereinafter ADULT LITERACY IN AMERICA].

¹⁵ *Id.* at 65.

¹⁶ U.S. Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Adult Literacy, http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp (last visited March 21, 2010).

¹⁷ ADULT LITERACY IN AMERICA, *supra* note 14, at 53.

¹⁸ Julia Parkinson & Brian Rowan, *Poverty, Early Literacy Achievement and Education Reform*, in EDUCATING THE OTHER AMERICA 73, 73 (Susan B. Neuman ed., 2008).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Susan B. Neuman, *Knowledge Cap: Implications for Early Education*, in 2 HANDBOOK OF EARLY LITERACY RESEARCH 29, 31 (David K. Dickinson & Susan B. Neuman eds., 2006).

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

to catch up to their low-risk peers, but by the end of third grade, almost a year's worth of extra instruction would be required.²⁴

The development of strong and comprehensive literacy skills is crucial to a well-functioning, productive and successful adult; and these skills are most fully and efficiently developed early in childhood. Both the nation and Mississippi must pay sufficient attention to the development of these reading, writing and other associated skills in our children. This paper will begin to detail the current state of literacy and literacy programs in Mississippi as well as successful and models, approaches and policies in other states.

II. Current Programs in Mississippi Addressing Literacy

The Mississippi Department of Education has defined four state reading goals:

All children will exit kindergarten with appropriate readiness skills; all first through third grade students will demonstrate growth toward proficiency in reading to ensure they exit third grade as readers; all fourth through ninth grade reading scores will improve; and Mississippi students will reach or exceed the national average in reading within the next decade.²⁵

In pursuit of these statewide goals, the Department of Education, national non-profit organizations and philanthropists have launched a range of literacy initiatives in Mississippi; initiatives that while promising, do require continued attention and action.

A. Government Initiatives

²⁴ Parkinson & Rowan, *supra* note 18, at 82.

²⁵ Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Academic Education, State Reading Goals, <http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/ACAD/ID/Curriculum/LAER/goals.html> (last visited March 21, 2010).